

2011

The Infidelity Issue in *Brideshead Revisited* and *Journey into Fear*

Ashley Phillips
SUNY Geneseo

Follow this and additional works at: <https://knight scholar.geneseo.edu/proceedings-of-great-day>
Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

Recommended Citation

Phillips, Ashley (2011) "The Infidelity Issue in *Brideshead Revisited* and *Journey into Fear*," *Proceedings of GREAT Day*: Vol. 2010 , Article 26.

Available at: <https://knight scholar.geneseo.edu/proceedings-of-great-day/vol2010/iss1/26>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the GREAT Day at KnightScholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Proceedings of GREAT Day by an authorized editor of KnightScholar. For more information, please contact KnightScholar@geneseo.edu.

The Infidelity Issue in Brideshead Revisited and Journey Into Fear

Submitted by: Ashley Phillips

Infidelity seems to be a common topic in 1940s British literature, given that the movements in marriage changed drastically in this decade as it gave birth to the “most ‘divorce-prone’ marriage cohorts—i.e. those couples married just before and during the second World War” (Rowntree 148). Also, it is widely accepted that there exists “peaks and troughs around the two world wars” in marriage rates (Office for National Statistics). It is therefore important to study the topics associated with marriages in 1940s novels, namely infidelity. The affairs in Brideshead Revisited and Journey into Fear reflect a growing trend in the 1940s, during which there was “a five-fold increase in divorce petitions during the Second World War.” Though Brideshead Revisited was published in 1944, its plot takes place over a much longer time frame: 1923-1942, with the extramarital affair between Julia Marchmain and Charles Ryder occurring before the onset of WWII. Journey Into Fear by Eric Ambler is a spy novel that takes place at the beginning of World War II, and whose main character, Graham, commits adultery with Josette, a prostitute. The differing time frames of the affairs in the novels (in relation to WWII) contribute to the characters’ differing motives for having the affairs.

The affair between Julia and Charles, both of whom are married to other people, is founded upon a desire of each party to find a deeper meaning in life. Without the actual, extant troubles of war (yet), these adulterers in Brideshead Revisited crave solid, significant reasons for living and a truer sense of purpose. Charles seeks removal from the glittering, fakeness of his wife Celia and Julia wishes to abandon her loveless marriage to Rex, a man

she describes as callous on several occasions. Both she and Charles want intense human companionship and a stronger sense of emotionality. In Journey Into Fear, Graham betrays his wife while he is being pursued by German assassins. In the midst of the perils World War II brings him, weapons engineer Graham often visits with Josette Martel, a married prostitute, and they kiss frequently. A close assessment and comparison of Brideshead Revisited and Journey into Fear shows a shift from having extramarital affairs in order to find profound meaning in life to engaging in unfaithfulness in order to provide a frivolous distraction from the trials of WWII.

In Brideshead Revisited, Charles Ryder is a married man with two young children, but he is incredibly unsatisfied with his life. As Joseph Hynes writes of Ryder: “He was unhappily married and has been separated or divorced for about a decade at the time of narrating. His two children might as well not exist for all the difference they make to his life or attitude. He is an architectural painter who apparently regards himself as a failed artist. He had hoped that the army in World War II might give him reason to live meaningfully, but that hope is also dashed before the start of the narrative” (236). Though Hynes is correct in stating that Charles is searching for a reason to live, he is incorrect in his exclusion of Charles’ adulterous affair with Julia as a source of this meaningfulness. Ryder looks for a sort of spiritual, momentous revelation in his relationship with Julia, for he is tired of his wife’s lack of depth.

The ways in which Charles portrays Celia in Brideshead Revisited as opposed to the ways he views Julia reveal what Charles seeks

in his adultery. Stark comparisons made between the two women serve to divulge Charles' reasons for cheating on his wife. For example, he describes Celia very clinically and states that she was made popular by her "softness and English reticence, her very white, small, regular teeth, her neat rosy fingernails...her modern jewellery, which was made at great expense to give the impression, at a distance, of having been mass-produced" (Waugh 234). Everything about Celia is presented as a façade and Charles' tone in this passage reveals that he is sickened by her falsehood.

Charles further illustrates the artificiality of his relationship with Celia when he describes the holidays spent with his family: "This annual sacrifice united us; here among the holly and mistletoe and the cut spruce, the parlor games ritually performed, the brandy-butter and the Carlsbad plums...she and I were accepted, whatever ugly rumors had been afloat in the past year, as man and wife" (Waugh 277-8). The gaudy imagery in the passage mimics the pretense he despises in his wife and in their union: it is all "fluff," transparent and thin. In the way the candies, choir and gold twine often conceal the true meaning of Christmas, they surround his marriage as a metaphor for its falsehood. If it is correctly assumed that Ryder does not want a woman with an air of falseness, then it can be logically concluded that he *does* want intelligence, depth and spirit, and he looks for it in Julia.

Julia is perceived through Ryder's eyes as a woman of truth and essentiality. Shortly after describing the holiday scene, he describes a site in which he and Julia sit outside and admire the natural beauty of their surroundings: "The sun had sunk now to the line of woodland beyond the valley...the light grew in strength...glorifying the head and golden shoulders of the woman beside me" (Waugh 279). In opposition to the artifice of the holiday festivities closely associated with Celia, Julia is enveloped in sunlight, the purest, most natural form of light. This difference between Celia and Julia reveals what Charles prizes in Julia, and therefore what he looks for in his affair with her—sincerity and profoundness. Clearly,

Ryder has an affair with Julia to fulfill a sense of purpose, perhaps spiritual, as "his love for Julia takes him a step higher and prepares him for love of God" (Gibson 85).

Julia also wants to fulfill a sense of purpose in her affair with Charles as she seeks true companionship and emotionality. Like Ryder, her way of describing her spouse serves to reveal what she hopes to achieve in her infidelity. She states that Rex, her husband, "...isn't a real person at all; he's just a few faculties of a man highly developed; the rest simply isn't there" (257). Julia does not want to be with Rex because his mind and spirit are absent, and she believes she will find intelligence and creativity in Charles.

Further evidence of Julia's desire to be with Charles in order to fulfill a deeper meaning in life is found in her wish to have a child with him. Julia wants to put her life back together, to pick up the fragments of marriage and love that her relationship with Rex has been reduced to, and put these pieces toward a meaningful life with Charles. This goal is interesting, and, given her previous stillborn daughter, suggests a hidden belief in Julia: if she bears Charles a healthy baby, their relationship will be lasting and momentous. This belief is in accordance with a study of couples in the 1940s reported on by Griselda Rowntree: "By far the highest proportion of parting occurred among the small number of infertile marriages in which brides had been under 20 years of age; over one-half (56 per cent) of such couples separated" (156). If Julia has Charles' baby, they are more likely to be a strong, stable couple, which is what Julia seeks in their affair. Like Charles, Julia is searching for depth and true companionship. The fact that their affair occurs prior to WWII clarifies their desire to find deeper meaning in their lives. Without the worries and heightened survival instincts brought about by war, the lovers focus on more spiritual and philosophical goals in their affair.

Journey into Fear, a novel set during the beginning of World War II, offers a very different perspective on infidelity. The turbulent, risky times brought on by war lead protagonist Graham to seek out an affair with the prostitute Josette in order to distract himself

from the dangers he faces. His choice of pursuing an affair with Josette rather than an old friend (like Charles and Julia do) implies a tone of frivolity and impulse, which complies with the goal of distraction from wartime problems. Josette as a prostitute adds another layer of depth to the novel, because “during World War II, there was widespread public apprehension about the declining morals of girls and young women in British cities and towns” (Rose 1147). Her prostitution does not fully surface, at least for Graham, until the very end of the novel, when he seems to realize that she was merely a distraction for him.

Though Graham seems bored by his wife Stephanie, this tedium does not drive him to pursue Josette—it is truly a need for diversion. He has compared other women to Stephanie in the past, and, finding Stephanie more comely, has remained faithful. He completes the same “test” with Josette and finds her, too, less attractive than Stephanie: “In the hard light of the unshaded bulb above her head she [Josette] looked smaller than she had looked on the dance floor; and a trifled haggard. Graham, thinking of his Stephanie’s rather buxom good looks, reflected that the woman before him would probably be quite plain in ten years’ time” (Ambler 21). Still, Graham desires Josette, and it is a desire for distraction that prompts him to kiss and fawn over her.

It is in times when Graham feels unsafe due to his involvement as an engineer in the war that he often turns to Josette for diversion. For example, when his assassin, Banat, enters the saloon, Graham asks Josette to accompany him on a walk. During the stroll, she happily chatters about nonsense, providing Graham with diversion. Additionally, when Moeller falsely tells Graham that he can feign illness to escape death, Moeller suggests that Josette accompanies Graham as he recovers from his forged sickness. Even Graham’s enemies understand that Josette is a tempting distraction for the engineer.

However, it cannot be ignored that Josette is not completely distanced from Graham’s dangers. In fact, she offers to get her husband’s revolver for Graham for protection and distracts Banat while Graham inspects his

cabin for his stolen gun; she is therefore involved with Graham’s troubles, and is not *solely* a distraction. Nevertheless, she is *fundamentally* a distraction for Graham, since he turns to her whenever he feels unsafe, and they often discuss lighthearted topics while together, such as traveling to Paris. Amidst Graham’s horrendous fear of Banat and death, both brought about by World War II, Josette seizes his attention by casually describing what entertainment and hotels there are in Paris. She is essentially a diversion from more pressing issues.

The infidelity portrayed in *Brideshead Revisited* and *Journey Into Fear* differs in the reasoning behind the adulterers involved. This difference stems from the onset of World War II and the dangers it brings. In *Brideshead Revisited*, the adulterers want to find meaning in life, true companionship and sentiments. These desires come from a lack of war. Without war and its problems, the infidelity is rooted in a wish for depth. However, during World War II adultery is committed in *Journey Into Fear* to serve a need for frivolity, as Graham needed Josette to distract him from his real troubles. In this novel, the onset of war creates a world where depth, the meaning of life, and companionship are issues that are ignored in lieu of casual entertainment. This infidelity serves to distance the characters from the present risks of the war. *Brideshead Revisited* and *Journey Into Fear* are novels that portray extramarital affairs very differently, an important discrepancy to investigate because it is so intimately tied to the main event of the 1940s: World War II.

Works Cited

- Ambler, Eric. *Journey Into Fear*. New York: First Vintage Crime Edition, 2002.
- Gibson, Claude L. “Review: Untitled.” *South Central Review*. 9.2 (1992): 84-5. 9 Dec. 2009. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/31895337>>.
- Hynes, Joseph. “Two Affairs Revisited.” *Twentieth Century Literature*. 33.2 (1987): 234-253. 5 Dec. 2009. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4413197>>.

Office for National Statistics. Marriages: UK Marriages decrease by 2.7%. 12 Feb 2009. 5

Dec 2009

<<http://www.statistics.gov.uk/cci/nugget.asp?id=322>>.

Rose, Sonya O. "Sex, Citizenship, and the Nation in World War II Britain." The American Historical Review. 103.3 (1998): 1147-1176. 5 Dec. 2009.

<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2651201>>.

Rowntree, Griselda. "Some Aspects of Marriage Breakdown in Britain during the last

Thirty Years." Population Studies. 18.2 (1964): 147-163. 6 Dec. 2009.

<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2172944>>.

Waugh, Evelyn. Brideshead Revisited. New York: Back Bay Books, 1972.